

## **APPENDIX H**

### **NRIS Staff Focus Groups and Interviews**

The Montana Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) was created in 1985 as a division of the Montana State Library and is the clearinghouse for natural resource information. Its mission is to make information on Montana's natural resources readily accessible. NRIS has three components: user services and support, GIS and Information Systems Development, and Natural Heritage Program. Its strategic plan is organized under five goal areas: data development, data delivery, outreach, working environment, and funding.

NRIS was reorganized in 2000. The consultants were asked to review the plan and structure of the department and to give a brief progress report on the achievement of the goals stated in the NRIS plan as a part of the evaluation of the Montana State Library's long-range plan. One consultant spent a day (May 10<sup>th</sup>) interviewing NRIS managers and conducting a staff focus group. A total of thirteen people spoke with the consultant.

#### **Findings:**

NRIS, as a department within a state library agency, is unique among the fifty-one state library agencies. Philosophically one can argue NRIS and libraries are in the same business, that of gathering, organizing, and disseminating information. In some ways NRIS is very similar to a special library in its subject and format focus and in the expertise its staff needs to carry out their work. As in special libraries there are different skill sets needed to serve the primary users than one ordinarily thinks of needing within a library setting. In the case of NRIS there are scientists, GIS programmers, and data coordinators as well as staff with more general technical skills. NRIS also brings a complex funding structure to the relationship with the State Library. Its budget is a mixture of state funds, "contract" work with other state agencies and with the Nature Conservancy, a private organization whose work is sometimes perceived as highly political.

With such different organizational cultures and clientele there seems no real reason to try to integrate NRIS more firmly into the Montana State Library although some staff interaction and cooperation would benefit both organizations. Both organizations currently benefit from their close structural relationship and physical proximity. From the State Library NRIS gains the perception of political and economic neutrality, which seems to be very important to the wide esteem in which NRIS is held and to the Heritage component of the department. The State Library gains from the "cutting edge" technology and the expertise of web designers in NRIS.

Overall, there seemed to be general agreement among those interviewed and those in the focus group that while progress has been made on some of the goals in the plan, it is too soon for a real assessment. The new director began in December of 2000 and, necessarily, turned his attention to the legislature and to budget issues. He has only recently been able to focus on redirecting NRIS energies. During the focus group

discussion some staff indicated they felt the reorganization was still in progress; they felt stressed by the lack of coordination among their jobs and by not knowing what the real priorities among projects ought to be. Some newer staff commented that they weren't carrying out the tasks they thought they had been hired to do. At the same time the participants seemed positive about the new director and about his abilities to move the department forward.

Focus group participants said the goals as listed were not in priority order. (Goals by subject area are 1: data development; 2: data delivery; 3: outreach; 4: working environment; and 5: funding.) Goals 1-3 are what the department does, but goal 5 was the most important, because without funding none of the others were possible. Goals 1-3 are listed in a logical process order rather than priority order. Basic things are being done under all the goals, but a sense of the department's moving forward in all areas is still lacking.

What follows is a goal by goal assessment of progress based on the comments of focus group participants and interviewees.

**Goal 1 Data Development:** Current clients appear satisfied in the work that is being done. Proactive identification and acquisition of new databases is lacking. Little work is being done on insuring the accuracy of data.

**Goal 2 Data Delivery:** Data is made accessible on the web. Knowledgeable users appear to be accessing it. Current clients appear satisfied. NRIS is perceived to be "cutting edge" in this area.

**Goal 3 Outreach:** None of the people with whom the consultant spoke thought NRIS had made progress in this area although all of them were quick to point out the new User Services Section head would have outreach as a major responsibility.

**Goal 4 Working Environment:** Morale is still suffering from the loss of staff and changes involved in the reorganization. However, the staff and the director have a mutual respect and seem to recognize what needs to happen to improve the situation.

**Goal 5 Funding:** Progress has been made in that the legislature approved a workable budget for the biennium. The director believes the department has two years (the biennium) to deal with issues of finding the NRIS niche and then using that information in working with the legislature.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

Nine staff members whose tenure ranged from six months to eleven years participated in the session. They were asked about the recent NRIS reorganization and its impact on their jobs, progress that had been made on the five goals of the NRIS plan, and the challenges that remain. They were also given the opportunity to add other comments or to bring up other topics they wished to discuss.

Reorganization hasn't been completed; things are still evolving. In some ways nothing has changed. In April 2000 there was a mass exodus when restructuring was announced; staff didn't support the restructuring because it looked like a personnel plan. Job skills in different jobs didn't match what was available and no training/retraining was offered. The program overall has stabilized and work is getting done, but it doesn't feel like a reorganization. Water information used to have four people; now there's just one. The reorganization may have had good intentions, but implementation came at a time when there were human resource problems; the human resource problems have been resolved. But, there was a window, April to August of 2000 when nothing was happening at all. Now needs are being met, except perhaps in the water area. Answers to queries aren't being met as quickly as they were. There used to be four people making maps; now there are only two.

The goals look familiar, but they aren't in priority order. (Goals by subject area are 1: data development; 2: data delivery; 3: outreach; 4: working environment; and 5: funding.) You can't do goals 1-4 without funding, goal 5. NRIS didn't get a director until December of 2000 and he had to focus on the legislature (rather than the goals of the agency). The first three goals are things NRIS has done all along. Goal 3: we are doing a great job in reaching most constituencies except the general public. Well, we're doing, but it's pretty disorganized and unplanned. Things are done in reaction, not by plan. Staff wants to be more thoughtful in what we do rather than just jumping on opportunities. Most data we're developing comes from US Geological and it's not really ready for people to use. We've been looking for direction and are just now getting attention. The new director seems to be pulling people together.

Goal 4: we were told we'd all have performance appraisals by last June, but we haven't. Performance appraisals would help insure our focus. Everybody is just trying to jam lots of work in; performance appraisals would help us find a common vision. I haven't sat down with my supervisor. He has no idea what I'm working on and I have no idea if I'm on-target. We're just doing what people ask us to do. We all need a better understanding of what each other does.

Six months ago people were hired to work on goals 1-3, but we haven't been assigned goals. Implementation is what's missing. Maybe if we put more energy on goal 4, that would help performance in goals 1-3. The director needs to sit down with people and ask what their professional goals are, then they can be given assignments that meet both the agency goals and their professional goals. We're all realists; we know we don't get to work on just what we want to work on, but some recognition that there are parallel tracks here would help. We don't want to lose these guys! Staff here is highly technical and highly employable elsewhere.

With the strategic plan we hoped to tie the mission, vision and goals together, but we still don't know what the mission, vision, and goals are. What do we say to the public?

Some clients were not pleased with their contracts during reorganization. Making Jim Hill the director was seen as stability for the program. Being housed in the (state) library

is perceived as making us neutral, unbiased, and 'free.' The public is amazed at what we can do when we give demos. They have no idea of our internal problems. NRIS is really a pretty cool place. We were able to coast when seven staff left the organization because of the stellar reputation we had.

We're not doing much on "insuring accuracy" on Goal 1 (data development). We just take what's available. We lack funding for working on the accuracy. I believe our mission is to deliver data. I don't think the web is the best way, but that's what we're doing. We haven't ever had a plan to acquire data other than from the U.S. Geological Survey, maybe the highway department. Part of it's getting out of contract deliverables.

Two participants (who were fairly new hires) said they weren't doing what they were hired to do. Two others were concerned that the move to the web was making their jobs superfluous. Rules against putting names on maps you've done seem not to be shared with new people so there's an unnecessary tension when different staff are doing things differently.

A tough part of being in high tech is that it's hard to be proactive.

We used to take 30 calls for data; now we get maybe five calls. The emphasis has switched to the web. The technology staff are moving and changing things and I don't know what they're doing or how to find things. It would be nice to have more amalgamation. We need to hear where the program is going. You have to log on to the web to find out what's going on. People call and you have to go onto the web to find out what they're talking about. It's confusing. The web hasn't helped me at all. I need training. I could help other staff by referring questions (about their areas or what they like to do) if I knew what they were doing.

I find it odd that Heritage has to have a contract outside NRIS to get a map made. Heritage used to get more behind the scenes help (from NRIS). Now I don't know who to go to for things.

Those of us who work on multiple projects are unsure of priorities between projects. Whose job is it to do this? Who takes care of the administrative details? Everybody needs a den mother, but Katrina shouldn't have to do a lot of the detail work she's given. "You shoulda seen us when the printer broke down!"

I don't enjoy meetings, but the last library-wide one was before Christmas. We do need weekly briefing meetings (within NRIS) to update process stuff. I don't have a clue what LISD does. I stopped going to NRIS meetings because they became techno-dump sessions. We need to get back on regularly scheduled NRIS staff meetings until we're on the same page. Maybe library meetings monthly or bimonthly. I hate not knowing what's going on.

Heritage has weekly staff meetings. There's an agenda template. The sessions are very productive. But, in Heritage we have zero opportunity for Outreach because we're behind and it costs to take a person off a project.

All of us should be able to do outreach. But we need a shared definition of what that is. The Nature Conservancy is cool now (wasn't cool ten years ago) and has an emotional appeal to the public. NRIS could sell that appeal to the public. (Alternatively, another participant thought that might be dangerous: "NRIS can't be too much conservation because it has to be neutral.")

We need four months of funding, time when no contract work had to be done, so we could plan. There are simple coordinating things that should be done. There needs to be a single workplan, worksheet, so that all the contract work is recorded the same.

We could be a little more warm and fuzzy if we worked these things out. "Most legislators aren't geeks!" (The program needs to put on a human face, not so techie oriented that no one can understand it.)

## **Interviews**

What follows are some key points and comments from the individuals interviewed.

There's a real need for better niche identification. Do users and funders agree with what we think we're about? We have to identify what it is we're going to do well. Once we figure out who's doing what and why we can take that to the legislature. We are a cost savings for the legislature. The clarification will be a big responsibility of the new section on outreach and education. At the same time it's important to continue as state of the art.

We're struggling with the lack of a plan on why we're pursuing particular databases, etc. We tend to be reactive; we go where the dollars are, but that's where the action is too, so it's not terribly bad. Our programmers don't have time to go looking for databases. The user's services group will have to do the planning on that. Our user base is pretty focused, but it isn't as broad as it should be. Again that's a big job for the new group. Probably the first target will be local governments and private industry. Many local governments and small private firms don't have GIS capabilities.

We're integrating the staff, meeting with the Heritage staff, forming teams with Heritage and the State library to develop a common theme on the website. In terms of rebuilding morale, we're not there yet. GIS skills are still needed; they just have to be delivered on the Internet. We've been a hands-on service bureau. We're moving in a different direction, but the hands-on won't go away.

The State Library gains a lot in terms of technology from having NRIS here. Integration at some level needs to come, perhaps knowing about each other's programs will be enough. NRIS Internet needs are totally different from the State Library.

It may be too soon to tell how reorganization is working. Since the strategic plan was developed four staff left, so it hasn't been an easy year. The reorganized structure is the right way to go. The agency does a lot of mapping contracts and that takes a real technical side. Those people prefer to write code rather than do outreach. With the new structure the split is along functional lines—separates the technical and the outreach. NRIS has three different logging request systems, which should be combined into a single approach. There are areas like that where the staff could be more efficient. NRIS is also replacing the mediated requests with Internet access, and that should also save time. People can get the answers themselves. We'll always need mediated requests, but there are lots of areas where users can do things for themselves.

Data development and delivery have always been our bread and butter. If you look at the objectives, we haven't made much progress on the goals. In the last year there has been significant progress in acquiring and deploying new data sets. The whole website infrastructure is new in last three years. But, we still have a lot to do. In 1996 it was a big deal to get a website going. Montana was the first state to get data into standardized files; today a kid could do it. NRIS should provide users with tools to do their own systems. We're integrating data into a common system.

A coordinated plan for outreach is sorely needed. We're doing a reasonable job at goal 4, working under lots of pay constraints. This section is made up of programmer-analysts who could make two to three times as much money in the private sector. So—we try to offer an open working environment; try to provide some training and conference support and cutting edge equipment. We need to get away from contacts with source agencies because that puts us in five other agencies' budgets.

Goal 3 (outreach) will need the most attention next year. Having a new section leader who will plan will help. Next after that would be Goal 2 (delivery). We have new tools, but they need integration. NRIS has an IMLS grant of \$238,00 over two years to develop a demonstration model.

Heritage had done its own strategic plan, aside from NRIS. Sometimes a financial crisis is a blessing in disguise; it lets you do things you know need to be done. Heritage here has a staff of about 13 people; 65-70% of the staff are scientists—botany, zoology, and ecology—who develop the databases. The rest of the staff are in data management, either systems or services, who maintain the databases and disseminate the information. At some point the Nature Conservancy will want real integration of the program with their host, to go from being a contract to being a part of state government, but that isn't a priority right now.

Integration and coordination are challenges. People don't know how to relate to us in their midst because we have different procedures, pay periods, etc. The budgeting and financial management for Heritage is all separate. The credibility issue is also a challenge. The Conservancy tries to keep Heritage at arms length (for its own protection).

Half of the Heritage budget is money that comes through grants and cost sharing projects. The managers within the department are also responsible for fund raising and program development. The staff are “strong people.” They’re currently revising their strategic plan. They also communicate a lot with their project partners, ask for a lot of input, ask questions like, What are your organization’s priorities? What will be your information needs over the next couple of years?

Heritage should build a better relationship/partnership with the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks over the next few years. They’re “fundamental to our health.”

Fish and Wildlife has had a long relationship with NRIS. NRIS had capabilities Fish and Wildlife didn’t have. Fish and Wildlife is a core agency funding NRIS; provides \$115,000 each biennium for core services. There are no down sides to the relationships and location at all. Their program (Heritage and NRIS) wouldn’t be as advanced if Fish and Wildlife weren’t here. We help NRIS and Heritage on some things and use everybody on their staffs at some level. Fish and Wildlife has two contracts with Heritage on web development and two with NRIS, one on core services and one to do a GIS program and map requests. “Montana is cutting edge because of NRIS.”

The NRIS Advisory Council reviewed and commented on the strategic plan and was involved with some of the reorganization. The NRIS director looks to the Advisory Council for policy direction. Reorganization needed to occur; there were lots of issues at the time. Legislators are always impressed with the NRIS staff and with the information they (the legislators) receive. There was lots going on, but it didn’t impact the quality of the information we received. Now NRIS has become stronger. They (NRIS) invite legislators over and get good interaction with them; provide mock up; get legislators involved in tailoring products to their clientele or constituency needs. NRIS is a unique group; their information is heavily used in policy studies. Having it attached to the State Library is good for its nonpartisan image, but it doesn’t really fit there.

The (current) study recommendations should include support for a better funding structure. There needs to be state funding, a general fund authorization. The State Librarian and the NRIS director could be doing better things than working on budgeting all the time.

Beyond the Advisory Council of users there’s a constituency of users in Montana to help the program financially and politically. It would be helpful to expand their base and to get more exposure of NRIS to people who could use the information. The Heritage Program and NRIS are separate, but need to be integrated more. There are political issues; sometimes Heritage is under fire. They have to work the relationship out more—cooperate, but maintain their own identities. Heritage programs are sometimes targeted by conservatives in legislature. If they were more proactive, they could build some defenses, but for the most part they work well together.